

“A Personal and a Political Tragedy”: INS Restrictions Hinder Educational Exchange

Ashley Nelson

An advanced Ph.D. candidate in Psychology at the Graduate Faculty, Malik (he uses only one name) was unable to return to the New School from his native Indonesia for over three months this past summer and fall. Malik has been working closely with TCDS to explore the possibility of expanding the Democracy & Diversity program to Southeast Asia, with Indonesia as the host country. As one of the people responsible for bringing students from Southeast Asia to the Democracy & Diversity Institute, he has helped open TCDS up to new perspectives and political realities. Yet despite this commitment to the principles of education and exchange - and despite the support of New School President Bob Kerrey, Congressman Jerrold Nadler, and others - the U.S. embassy in Jakarta refused to grant him a visa he had received numerous times before.

As The Washington Post reported on September 24, 2002, Malik was among 10,000 men from 26 (predominantly Muslim) countries who were delayed two months or more as they awaited (or are still awaiting) permission to enter the U.S. At first, Malik recalls, the embassy said approval would come in a month. But the month came and went with no visa issued. “They just told me, ‘It’s not ready,’ then they stopped telling me anything...That’s when I smelled trouble.”

When the embassy advised him to check on-line for updates, Malik turned to the Graduate Faculty for help. Within days, President Bob Kerrey, Dean Richard Bernstein, and Congressman Jerrold Nadler of Manhattan had faxed letters to the embassy on his behalf. Malik’s six-year old daughter even wrote directly to President Bush.

“It’s a personal tragedy and it’s a political tragedy,” Dean Bernstein told The Washington Post. “This is a student we know extremely well...If America is really serious about its policy of trying to fight terrorism and make friends among moderates, then this is just the type of student you want to invite in.”

But instead of being praised for his work in bringing democracy to the country, “I felt unwanted, unwelcome,” says Malik. He was so upset he actually considered the idea of not returning at all. “New York was my home...the place where I wanted to be - before all this anyway.” With his wife and two children, both born in the U.S., far away at home, things had indeed gotten rough. But then, finally, the visa was approved - the very day before the bombing in Bali. Thankfully, he was still allowed to return.

Talking with the ever calm and soft-spoken Malik, it is hard to detect any lingering bitterness - at least towards Americans in general. “As my good friend [GF Assistant Dean] Robert Kostrzewa reminds me, it’s the government, not the people.” But the incident clearly stays with him, as do some unintended consequences of it. For one, he notes, he missed out on teaching - a source of fun and income. “With classes beginning, they had to give the job to someone else.” More importantly though, as he says, “I should have been a doctor by now!” Because of the delays, Malik was unable to make his dissertation defense, scheduled for late September. With one advisor coming in from Paris, he is working hard to reschedule it.

Ashley Nelson received her M.A. in Liberal Studies from the Graduate Faculty in 2002 and is currently Publications Coordinator at the GF. She writes frequently on politics, women, and popular culture for various newspapers and national magazines.